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ABSTRACT

Using some of the tools of fantasy theme analysis, this paper analyzes the rhetoric of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy during the United States Civil War, as an expression of the rhetorical visions of the American South. Specifically, the paper deals with two speeches--Davis's farewell to the United States Senate, from which he resigned in 1861, and his inaugural address. The rhetoric is examined in terms of the dual themes of slavery and secession, the most important themes requiring rhetorical justification in light of the impending war. The paper concludes that in terms of logical argument, the themes developed by Davis made up an acceptable debate case or legal brief; it contends, however, that as a rhetorical vision to nurture the people throughout the war years, Davis's rhetoric was indicative of a dogmatic, pathetic naivete. (FL)

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SECESSION AND SLAVERY

JEFFERSON DAVIS'S RHETORICAL VISIONS OF THE SOUTH

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Of all political acts, war generates a body of rhetoric emphasizing more sharp imagery and rich fantasy development than any other. War is the most drastic and dramatic act available to politics. It calls forth greater individual and national sacrifice, with more at stake in the outcome, than any other policy a government might choose to pursue. In order to justify the struggle, the loss, the grief, and the risk, a strong body of rhetoric indeed is demanded. Witness Churchill's "Blood, sweat, toil and tears," and FDR's speech declaring war on Japan on the "date that will live in infamy."

Ernest Bormann's innovative method of rhetorical criticism, fantasy theme analysis, seems particularly suitable for studying the rhetoric of Jefferson Davis. Davis was the chief spokesman for the Southern cause to the North while he was a U.S. Senator from Mississippi, and his Farewell Address to the Senate upon the secession of the Southern states is regarded as a model of Southern oratory. His rhetoric must

of necessity be interpreted in the context of justifying an inevitable war.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the rhetoric of Jefferson Davis as an expression of the rhetorical visions of the South, using some of the tools of fantasy theme analysis to interpret and illuminate its meaning. Two speeches, his "Farewell to the Senate," and his Inaugural Address, shall be analyzed. In particular, his rhetoric will be examined in terms of the dual themes of slavery and secession, the most important themes requiring rhetorical justification in the situation.

The Method. Inspired by the work of Robert Bales in small group interaction analysis, Ernest Bormann suggested that public rhetoric consists at least in part of dramatic narratives, featuring characters who play their roles in scenarios in order to achieve their purposes. As in any drama, the roles played by characters in pursuit of their goals are controlled by their motives for actions. Simply put, according to Bormann, "Public dramas consist of a cast of characters, some of whom are good guys and some of whom are bad guys, and these characters take part in dramatic situations and do things." These scenarios, or fantasies, have the power to arouse similar fantasies in the minds of an audience, or to "chain out."[1] Once a fantasy theme chains out and is accepted in a larger context, it becomes a rhetorical vision. "Once such a rhetorical vision emerges, it

contains dramatis personae and typical plot lines that can be alluded to in all communication contexts and spark a response reminiscent of the original emotional chain. The same dramas can be developed in detail when the occasion demands to generate emotional response."[2]

Fantasy theme analysis is limited as a method of criticism. There is no scientific way to determine at what point, or to what extent, a given fantasy "chains out" in the minds of an audience. This limitation is not unique to Bormann's method, of course; traditional critical methods also lack empirical techniques for verifying the influence of a speech in either the short term or upon posterity. This type of judgment is always a subjective evaluation made by the critic.

Going beyond this general admission, it must also be recognized that fantasy theme analysis is a decidedly limited critical technique when applied to a predominantly logical speech. Jefferson Davis was known as a cool, unemotional, logical orator. He was a thinker whose convictions were based upon his interpretations of the Constitution. He rarely discussed slavery in terms of human experience; he never once compared the life styles of slaves on Southern plantations against those of paid laborers in the Northern factories, which probably would have been a strong metaphor to use in supporting his cause. No doubt a fantasy theme analysis of the "fire eaters" from The Southern States would yield a far

richer harvest of metaphors, narratives, and dramatic scenarios than these formal speeches of the relatively moderate Jefferson Davis.

Yet the point of using any particular method of critical analysis is to illuminate and furnish new insight into the rhetoric used in a situation. Although an analysis of the lines of argument in the rhetoric of Davis would be appropriate, even obvious, it is still true that additional illumination and insight might be gained by the application of a new critical approach. For this reason, I have chosen to examine the rhetoric of Jefferson Davis within the framework of its fantasy themes related to slavery and secession.

Naturally, the rhetorical visions of the North and the South were contradictory. That of the North emphasized slavery in its human aspects, portraying the slaveowners as villains who victimized the black persons they owned, with Abraham Lincoln as a hero who tried to free the slaves out of his motives of right and compassion. The North equated secession with willful revolt. These visions did not match those of the South, as explicated by the rhetoric of Jefferson Davis. The South envisioned one government pitted against another government, in which the States of the North interfered with those of the South, both in the exercise of their Constitutional rights, and in their economic system. Since such interference perverted the original intent of the

Founding Fathers, the Southern States chose to withdraw from the Union and create a new Confederacy.

Davis's Rhetorical Visions of Slavery and Secession. Throughout his career as a Southern spokesman, Davis's two principal fantasy themes were slavery and secession. During the fall of 1858, he advocated slavery on economic and moral grounds in a series of speeches in New England.[3] In one of those speeches, he told an audience at Faneuil Hall,

> By what standards do they measure it [slavery]? Not the Constitution; the Constitution recognizes the property in slaves in many forms, and imposes obligations in connection with that recognition. Not the Bible; that justifies it. Not the good of society; for, if they go where it exists, they find that society recognizes it as good.[4]

Secession was a burning issue, as it had been in the 1850 Compromise debates. Davis opposed secession except as a last resort; still, he defended its legality. He told the Mississippi legislature in 1858, "In the language of the venerated Calhoun, I consider the disruption of the Union as a great, though not the greatest, calamity."[5] In a Senate speech on January 10, 1861, the day after Mississippi seceded, he laid out his interpretation of state sovereignty as the legal basis of secession: "The Constitution was a compact between independent States; it was not a national government."[6]

The Farewell Address to the U.S. Senate, given on January 21, 1861, is recognized as one of the model speeches

of Southern oratory.[7] Compared with other speeches of the period, it is brief (about a half hour long); yet some consider it a complete exposition of the argument for secession. It is also a refutation of the Northern vision of slavery. As such, it warrants a more careful examination in this paper to determine its fantasy themes and its rhetorical vision for the South in the context of impending war.

The situation was charged with tension and excitement. After Lincoln's election, Mississippi seceded from the Union on January 9, following South Carolina's lead; but Davis had kept his seat in the Senate because he had received no official word from his home state. When he was finally notified, he announced that he would make his final appearance in the Senate at noon on the 21st. On that day, the Senate was packed by nine o'clock. Spectators, mostly women, filled the galleries, corridors, and aisles, in total disregard for fire rules. Seasoned observers were reminded of the old days when Calhoun or Webster was scheduled to make a notable speech.[8]

In her memoirs, Mrs. Varina Davis recorded that her husband had been ill for more than a week before the speech, and that his doctor advised him that he was physically unable to make the speech as scheduled. But he would not be deterred.[9] He was preceded by four other southern Senators who also made farewell speeches. As he began to speak, he

showed signs of deep emotion. He soon gained control of himself, and his old force returned.

He introduced the speech by referring to the occasion: "I rise, Mr. President, for the purpose of announcing to the Senate that I have satisfactory evidence that the State of Mississippi, by a solemn ordinance of her people in convention assembled, has declared her separation from the United States."[10]

Davis had but one point to make in the speech: "I have for many years advocated, as an essential attribute of State sovereignty, the right of a State to secede from the Union." He supported this thesis through a variety of arguments, each of which repeated a fantasy theme he had developed through a career of secessionist apologia. Necessarily, his vision of secession also included a reference to slavery as well.

First, Davis took pains to distinguish between secession and nullification. Secession was justified when "the people of the States, have so acted as to convince us that they will not regard our Constitutional rights." On the other hand, nullification of a federal law was asserted by a State which yet remained in the Union. The distinction between these actions hinged on whether the sovereignty of an individual State permitted it to withdraw from the Union upon denial of the Constitution by other member States. The distinction was important, according to Davis, only because the arguments of Calhoun, the Nullifier, had been turned

against the South in the issue of secession. Legally, those arguments "applied to the case of a State refusing to obey the laws while yet a member of the Union. This is not the case which is now presented."

Thus, in the fantasy spun out by Davis, state governments were dramatized as personae, playing roles in a scenario to achieve their goals in keeping with their motives to act.

> A state finding herself in the condition in which Mississippi judges she is, in which her safety requires that she should provide for the maintenance of her rights out of the Union, surrenders all the benefits . . . and thus divesting herself of every benefit, taking upon herself every burden, she claims to be exempt from any power to execute the laws of the United States within her limits.

Having stated the thesis for his Farewell Address, and having depicted the nature of secession through this narrative, Jefferson Davis proceeded to support the action taken by Mississippi through a series of logical arguments, each of which consisted of different fantasies. Davis reminded the audience of his previous defense of secession on another earlier occasion when Massachusetts had made the threat to do it. In this reference, Davis accomplished two things: he reaffirmed the image of himself as consistent on the argument; and he painted a fantasy of another personified state government in the North, Massachusetts, as making the same argument for which Mississippi was now being attacked.

Next, Davis turned to the documentary evidence. Mississippi believed that the Union was depriving her of her

rights. Unstated, but understood, the rights in question involved the complex of issues surrounding slavery. Mississippi "has heard proclaimed the theory that all men are created free and equal, and this made the basis of an attack upon her social institution: and the sacred Declaration of Independence has been invoked to maintain the position of the equality of the races." Davis's refutation of this line of Unionist attack was largely image-oriented, portraying States as _personae_ taking actions towards their goals, based on motives.

First, Davis explained that the line, "All men are created equal," referred to King George III:

> That Declaration of Independence is to be construed by the circumstances and purposes for which it was made. The communities were declaring their independence; the people of those communities were asserting that no man was born--to use the language of Mr. Jefferson--booted and spurred to ride over the rest of mankind; that men were created equal--meaning the men of the political community; that there was no divine right to rule; that no man inherited the right to govern; that there were no classes by which power and place descended to families, but that all stations were equally within the grasp of each member of the body-politic.

Davis went on to point out that the Declaration of Independence emphatically did not refer to slaves as equal to their masters:

> They have no reference to the slaves; else, how happened it that among the items of arraignment made against George III was that he endeavored to do just what the North has been endeavoring of late to do--to stir up insurrection among our slaves?

Next, Davis brought up the Constitution, as a support for slavery. "When the Constitution was formed," he said,

> The same idea was rendered more palpable for there we find provision made for that very class of persons as property; they were not put upon the footing of equality with white men--not even upon that of paupers and convicts; but, so far as representation was concerned, were discriminated against as a lower caste, only to be represented in the numerical proportion of three fifths.

Next, having laid his foundation of supporting arguments, Davis drove home his concluding reaffirmation of the ultimate step to secession, based on his indictment of the motives of the North:

> Then, Senators, we recur to the compact which binds us together; we recur to the principles upon which our government was founded; and when you deny them, and when you deny to us the right to withdraw from a Government which thus perverted threatens to be destructive of our rights, we but tread in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence, and take the hazard.

Finally, he concluded, "Mr. President, and Senators, having made the announcement which the occasion seemed to me to require, it only remains for me to bid you a final adieu."

The preceding excerpts should make it clear that Davis's argument consisted entirely of refutations of the rhetorical vision of the North, especially with regard to the meaning of the Declaration of Independence and also of the Constitution. Davis made no affirmative defense of the institution of slavery. Davis told the Senate only how his adversaries had misinterpreted the documentary basis for the issues of slavery and secession. He was a rebuttalist, not an advocate.

The farewell addresses of the five Southern Senators, taken as a whole, were the summation of "several decades of southern thinking in regard to states' rights, territorial rights, and slavery."[11] In particular, the Farewell Address of Jefferson Davis "may be better understood if it is viewed as a peroration, a summing up, as it were, of four years of argument."[12] It was, according to Allen Tate, "one of the most characteristic speeches Davis ever delivered; it betrayed the curious separation of his intellect and his feelings."[13] One is reminded of the apocryphal story of Webster's Reply to Hayne. Daniel Webster's renowned oration was produced literally overnight. When asked how long it took him to prepare his speech, Webster replied, "Forty years!" So it appears with the Farewell Address of Jefferson Davis.

However, when we turn to his Inaugural Address on February 18, 1861, an entirely new set of contingencies applies. It is significant that Davis read this speech from a manuscript,[14] which is a clear signal that he was in a new intellectual territory. As the Southern spokesman in the Senate, he never spoke from notes. Apparently it was one thing to repeatedly justify the Southern positions on slavery and secession to a hostile U.S. Senate over the years; and another thing to stand before a Southern, rabidly partisan crowd, secession having just been accomplished, and outline the steps that should be taken next.

Personally, Davis was surprised and disappointed at being elected President of the Confederacy. He anticipated war; he keenly desired to be appointed the leader of the Confederate armies. Upon learning of his election, he had to travel from his plantation at Brierfield, Mississippi, to Montgomery. There was no direct railroad route. To reach Montgomery, Davis rode the train from Mississippi to Tennessee, back down to Atlanta, and across through West Point, Georgia, a fatiguing journey of over 800 miles.[15] At each stop, he warned the citizens that war was imminent, but he was not always believed.

The Confederate government was provisional, and Davis apparently considered himself to be a temporary President, subject to the establishment of a permanent government later. He had obviously devoted more thought to the act of secession than to what should follow. The situation contained so many elements of uncertainty, his speech could not escape a meandering quality. The status of the new government was unclear, and the nature of its relationship with the Union from which it had newly separated was in limbo. War had not yet begun.

In his Inaugural Speech, Davis appealed for peace to continue; but he also called for gearing up to meet the defense needs of the Confederacy, especially the need to create an effective Navy. He spoke in lengthy generalities about the Constitution, now and again in his speech. Feeling the

impact of his quandary, he said at one poin. "You will see many errors to forgive, many deficiencies to tolerate, but you shall not find in me either a want of zeal or fidelity to the cause, that is to me highest in hope and of most enduring affection," and again, in his conclusion, "I will hope, by due diligence in the performance of my duties, though I may disappoint your expectations, yet to retain, when retiring, something of the good will and confidence which welcome my entrance into office."[16] Remarkable statements, those, coming from the chosen leader of a new nation in his Inaugural Address.

But what of slavery? What fantasy theme did Jefferson Davis create to rally the new nation around in preparation for the inevitable struggle? Interestingly, the Inaugural Address does not contain a word about it. Slavery is not mentioned once. What <u>is</u> invoked is a description of the Southern economy:

> An agricultural people--whose chief interest is the export of a commodity required in every manufacturing country--our true policy is peace, and the freest trade which our necessities will permit. It is alike our interest, and that of all those to whom we would sell and from whom we would buy, that there should be the fewest practicable restrictions upon the interchange of commodities.

Again:

> Our industrial pursuits have received no check--the cultivation of our fields has progressed as heretofore--and even should we be involved in war, there would be no considerable diminution in the production of the staples which have constituted

> our exports, and in which the commercial world has an interest scarcely less than our own.

Cotton, not slavery, was the justifying motif which he advanced in support of disunion. It goes without saying, of course, that King Cotton relied upon a labor intensive system of production, which meant slavery. Davis's rhetorical vision of slavery was the maintenance of the economy. It was export and commerce with foreign nations. It was prosperity. Slavery, in the rhetorical vision of Jefferson Davis, was not personal; it was an economic way of life for the nation. He did not say, "We are humane in our treatment of the slaves"--although his biographers write that he was good to his own slaves--but rather, "[We are] An agricultural people . . . ."

After all, Davis was elected to office only by the cotton states; at that point, just seven states of the deep South comprised the new Confederacy. Although Davis himself never admitted that the overriding concern of the slaveholders was to protect their property investment, estimated at between $3-4 billion, many slaveholders held that as their principal motive.[17] Cotton exports in 1860 were worth $191 million--57 percent of the value of all American exports. In view of the absolute dependence of the Southern economy on the maintenance of slavery, it was impossible for any Southerner to argue for its end.[18]

There was actually little need for Jefferson Davis to make any sort of case for slavery in the South. Of all

fantasy themes related to the rhetorical vision of the South, the role of the slave, and the legitimacy of slavery, was the one which had already chained out the most. Moreover, it was established by the strongest authority and most effective determiner of public opinion--The Church. James W. Silver concluded, "The overwhelming majority of Southern clergymen had for a generation given the church's blessing to the institution of slavery and its right to spread into the territories."[19] These clergymen were leaders of tremendous influence in every community. Through their ultimate legitimizer role (to use Bormann's phrase), "Abraham Lincoln became another kind of Egypt and Jefferson Davis a second Moses."[20] When Jefferson Davis invoked the name of God in his Inaugural Address, as he did repeatedly, he thus aroused the indelible doctrine of the divine order of the South with it. He did not have to tell his audience once again that slavery was sacred, as well as economically essential. It was enough to mention God and agriculture in the same speech.

Yet in the rhetorical vision of Jefferson Davis given in his Inaugural Speech, the villainy of the Northern States did not reside in their desire to free enslaved blacks from cruel owners. Rather, it was in their perverse ambition to destroy the agricultural industry of the Southern States.

Such a vision was logical and abstract, hardly concrete and dramatic. It was literally less emotive and less persuasive than the fantasy themes he generated in his

Farewell Address concerning the intentions of the Founding Fathers towards slavery as they crafted the Declaration of Independence. Perhaps, given the substance of the arguments, he could have done nothing else. How is it that his rhetoric fails to rank alongside that of Churchill and FDR? In large part, because he failed to tell his audience how these themes were going to sustain them in imminent, protracted war.

Summary. The rhetorical situation was of impending war--the "noblest and least avoidable of all the great mass-conflicts of which till then there was record," according to Winston Churchill.[21] The situation called for a rhetorical vision to unite the nation about to undergo the battle, a truly Olympian task. Jefferson Davis tried to coalesce his people around the themes of secession and slavery: secession, as a rational response of anyone wronged by other members of a group formed voluntarily, of individual, personified, sovereign states; and slavery, as a divine component of the economic institution of the region. In terms of a logical argument, these themes developed by Jefferson Davis make up a fair debate case or legal brief, especially his defense of secession against the attacks of his Northern opponents, based on the documentary evidence. As a rhetorical vision to nurture and sustain the people throughout the coming four years, it was indicative of a dogmatic, pathetic naiveté.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Ernest G. Bormann and Nancy Bormann, Speech Communication: An Interpersonal Approach (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972), p. 165.

[2]Ernest G. Bormann, "The Eagleton Affair: A Fantasy Theme Analysis," QJS, 59 (April 1973), p. 143.

[3]Robert T. Oliver, History of Public Speaking in America. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1965), pp. 220-221.

[4]Varina Howell Davis, Jefferson Davis: Ex-President of the Confederate States of America (New York: Belford Company, Publishers, 1890), p. 619.

[5]Hudson Strode, Jefferson Davis: American Patriot 1808-1861 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), p. 313.

[6]James Ford Rhodes, History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850, Vol. III (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1895), p. 256.

[7]Thomas E. Watson, History of Southern Oratory, Vol. IX of The South in the Building of a Nation (Richmond: The Southern Historical Publication Society, 1909), p. 54.

[8]Strode, p. 289.

[9]Mrs. Davis, p. 296.

[10]The Farewell Address was published in the Congressional Globe, 1860-61, p. 487. This paper uses the copy found in Ina Woestermeyer Van Noppen, The South: A Documentary History (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1958), pp. 274-276. All quotations from the Farewell Address in this paper are from this same source.

[11]Glenn E. Reddick, "A Study of the Farewell Speeches of The Southern Senators at the Time of Secession," M.A. Thesis, University of Florida, 1949, p. 122.

[12]Ralph E. Richardson, "The Speaking and Speeches of Jefferson Davis," Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1950, p. 232.

[13]Allen Tate, Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall (New York: Minton, Balch, & Co., 1929), p. 12.

[14]Mrs. Augusta Bellinger Cheney, "The Inauguration of Jefferson Davis by An Eye Witness, Written at the Request of Sophia Bibb Chapter, U.D.C., February 6, 1929." Copy located in Jefferson Davis Inauguration Vertical File, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama. Mrs. Cheney wrote, "Following the prayer Mr. Davis spoke, that is read his inaugural address and then immediately took the oath of office, administered by Judge Howell Cobb."

[15]William Warren Rogers, "President Jefferson Davis," Montgomery Advertiser, February 18, 1957, no page number shown on Xerox furnished by Library Division, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

[16]"Inaugural Address of President Jefferson Davis Delivered February 18, 1861," Xerox copy of 5-page manuscript provided by Library Division of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, no source indicated. Manuscript compared with the version published in the States Rights Advocate (Troy, AL), February 28, 1861, p. 1. No differences were noted between the two versions on any of the parts cited in this paper. During his Inaugural Address, eye witness accounts state that Davis read the speech from a manuscript. All quotations from the Inaugural Address in this paper are taken from the Archives copy.

[17]Clement Eaton, Jefferson Davis (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 96.

[18]Bruce Cotton, The American Heritage Short History of the Civil War (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1960. Dell Books, ed., printed in 1963), p. 12.

[19]James W. Silver, Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1957), p. 23.

[20]Ibid., p. 32.

[21]Winston Churchill, History of the English-Speaking Peoples, ed. Henry Steele Commager (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), p. 534.